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ABSTRACT

Providing instruction in language theory is an innovative technique for use in remedial and other composition courses in the two-year college. Such innovations provide intellectually stimulating material to students who lose interest when confronted with traditional grammar and composition. Students are acquainted with American Edited English in such a way as to make them aware of the power and range in the language and the need for a standard form among many dialects, as well as to facilitate the representation of abstract grammar and composition material in tangible, concrete forms. Theories and texts chosen should be compatible and coherent enough to introduce fundamental language concepts, and flexible enough to permit illustration by easily understood examples. A methodological approach founded on the work of Georges Gusdorf, S. I. Hayakawa, Noah Jacobs, and Roland Barthes and using Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the sign can present language and its usages in an understandable but challenging framework that can be illustrated by a wide range of popular language uses and misuses. (DF)

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Language and Related Approaches to the Writing Process

by

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All teachers of freshman composition are well acquainted with the marked decline in verbal and writing skills exhibited by an increasingly large number of incoming students. For the most part, we have responded by creating and mandating 'remedial' grammar/basic writing courses which, overall, present the basics of composition in formats that mirror more traditional, sectionalized texts, even though the work of theoretical innovators such as James Moffett, Donald Murray, and Mina Shaughnessy has made us more aware of the necessary, interlocking stages and processes involved in the successful teaching and acquisition of sound writing skills. The more traditional approaches, although somewhat successful on a short-term basis, in relation to the permanent acquisition of verbal and writing skills, yield tenuous results, while openly perpetuating many of the ill feelings for "English Composition" students have accumulated during twelve years of hearing, memorizing (for the examination), and forgetting (immediately following the examination) the same intangible grammar rules, mechanics, and composition techniques. If these fundamentals have not penetrated and become permanent, functional parts of a student's language and writing skills in the course of twelve years of compulsory education, how can we expect another term or semester of repetition to rectify the situation? Yet few of us would deny the necessity of knowing and successfully using those rules, or the need for their constant infusion into the collegiate learning experience of our students, or the legitimacy of their forming the foundation of any remedial English course.

How can we legitimately expect our students to learn and use effectively abstract grammatical constructs, compositional and rhetorical skills if they do not first have a feel for the language itself--an extended awareness of what this thing called the English language <u>is</u> and does, or can be made to do. The novice must first develop a feel for his medium before he begins striving for

the title of painter, sculptor, musician, artisan. Surely the writer, and perhaps most acutely the novice writer in a remedial English course where the medium to be mastered is everyday language, must also first develop a feel for his medium before he can realistically be expected to mold it into Standard Written English in well constructed expository essays.

The more rural, the farther removed from the influences of metropolitan areas the backgrounds of the student population, the more acute the need for language introduction. Appalachia, from Pennsylvania south along the mountain range, is an illustrative example. Post-secondary education is not uniformly acknowledged as useful or even desirable--only what is absolutely necessary to secure the job and the income level sought--by both parents and students, most of whom are the first in their families to attend college. Students consider important only those courses which are directly related to their majors, and see no reason for the required English courses, especially when the first of these is a remedial or 'basic skills' grammar course. Everyday language for such students is predominately a combination of slang, colloquialisms, cliches, and illiteracies. Composition is simply a matter of 'saying it in writing', literally. To attempt to alter permanently in ten or eighteen weeks a lifetime of hearing and using this 'language' is a task of near impossibility.

Beginning composition students, and especially remedial students, must first be acquainted with American Edited English in such a way as to make them aware of the power and range resident in the language, the need for a standard form of the language amongst innumerable dialects (students are rarely aware of their own, and quite interested when they become so), and so as to facilitate the representation of abstract grammar and composition material in tangible, concrete forms.

Preliminaries

Several prominent contemporary language theories are available. In simplified form, any of these would provide the student with challenging academic information, stimulating in its novelty. A few guidelines should, however, be observed in selecting theories and texts. Both the theories and the texts chosen should be compatible and coherent enough to introduce fundamental language concepts, with emphasis on explanations of 'words' rather than on memorization of 'rules' and then be able to be expanded into consistent explanations for other components in the course and programme--innovative approaches treating language awareness, words and simple contexts, sentence structures, syntax, paragraph and essay development, organization and structure. The language theories chosen must be expansive enough to be applicable throughout the course--from grammar and punctuation, to mechanics and syntax, to sentences and contexts, to paragraph and essay development--so that students can clearly see its relevance, and can gain maximum benefit from constant practice of continuing, consistently evolved applications of theoretical principles.

Theories and texts should be flexible enough to permit illustration by easily understood examples taken from the everyday language world of the students. Given the novelty of language theory for most students, unfamiliar theories must be at least partially conveyed through familiar, everyday language constructions, so as not to intimidate students with esoteric philosophies. The following combinations represent adaptations and uses of theories, methodologies, and texts that I have found beneficial in formulating a supplemental approach to teaching both remedial and required English courses.

Language: Theories and Texts

Many theories treating the origin and nature of language, its various forms and usages, and how one becomes proficient in its written forms have been

posited by noted scholars in remedial education. The following, briefly outlined approach is the child of several rather odd bedfellows. One recurring, professional lament heard frequently among junior college and two-year institution faculties, voiced most loudly by those with strong research interests and by recent acquirers of the terminal degree, centres on the lack of opportunity to utilize highly specialized knowledge when the teaching load is almost exclusively remedial and required composition courses. For me, that involved a methodology derived from structuralism, phenomenology, Russion formalism, and the works of Freud and Lacan, and applied to Joyce's Finnegans Wake. Fortunately, much of the work in these areas was done as part of doctoral studies at two British universities, the University of Essex and Cambridge University. Graduate teaching afforded me the opportunity to observe, first-hand, and participate actively in a totally different and, in my opinion, very effective approach to the teaching and acquisition of polished writing skills.

My academic background, coupled with the desired attributes of the theories and texts chosen led me to select an approach compatible with that expounded in selected passages from Georges Gusdorf's La Parole, translated by Paul Brockelman and published under the title Speaking (1965) by Northwestern University in their Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy series, to acquaint my students with a broadly based, contemporary body of language theories. Although an older text, Gusdorf presents his material in clear, concise, almost jargon-free prose. In order to ease students into unfamiliar territory, I combined the Gusdorf readings with semiologically-oriented explanations and discussions centred on fundamentals from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, making maximum use of his graphic illustrations to provide tangible, concrete representations of fundamental concepts. Further attempts to help

students deal with unfamiliar material centred around Roland Barthes' Mythologies, as translated by Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, 1972), which, once 'Americanized', can provide the material for some mutually interesting and interest-generating classes. A 1974 article by S. I. Hayakawa entitled "Poetry as Ads", released through The Register and Tribune Syndicate, is also useful for providing easily understood examples which students can immediately apply in dealing more effectively with everyday language usages, and manipulations.

Another major need in the well-rounded remedial English course is reading. The almost uniform use of 'readers' in required composition courses acknowledges that need. Ultimately, all students require 'examples' or 'yardsticks' against which to criticize, constructively, their own and others' work. Perhaps the single most significant overall process involved in a student's successful acquisition and retention of sound writing skills must be constant practice--Mina Shaughnessy in her Errors and Expectations suggests remedial students write not less that 1500-2000 words per week--coupled with the reading of interesting, well written, illustrative prose pieces which advance the student's academic horizons, while relating directly to the advancement of course material. In this direction students were encouraged to seek out Noah Jacobs' Naming-Day in Eden (Macmillan, 1960). Jacobs subtly presents many of phenomenology's premises, without the use of alien terminology, in a light-hearted narrative of the day Adam concocted the names for the world's contents.

A methodological approach founded upon this rather eclectic, yet highly compatible and interrelated grouping of theories and texts presents language and its usages to the student within an understandable, but challenging framework which can be exampled by a wide range of popular language uses and misuses confronted daily. The student, armed with some fundamentals, will soon be exhibiting increased language analysis, in relation to advertising and other popular usages, and other prose pieces, including his own and others' practice

writings. Once students have begun analytically examining language, the graphics of Saussure's model of the sign can be reintroduced and extended into formal applications of the newly discovered language.

Sentences, Contexts, Paragraphs: Applications

With altered terminology, Saussure's graphic representation of linguistic sign (word) as signifier plus signified can be expanded to illustrate and explain schematically and tangibly the writer's skillful manipulation of denotation (more accurately, context-based denotation) and connotation, concrete and sensory detail, varied sentence structure, along with the obvious necessity of proper decorum. By introducing the fundamental concepts of semiology, students can be shown how punctuation, syntax, and sentence, paragraph and essay structures can be used to replace some facial and other gestures we all use to augment the communicativeness of everyday speech. In seeking useful beginning examples, the question, "How can the communication conveyed in 'body language' be transformed into written language?", will usually ease students into more critical analyses and discussions. The constant intra- and interrelationships of dualities evolved from the basic synthesis of signifier and signified into sign can be used to explain the idea of context. Students can be shown graphically the evolution and innerworkings of contexts ranging from those involved in the simplest of sentences, through compound and complex structures, and into paragraphs and essays. As the basic signifier-signified-sign dialectic evolves to these proportions, resulting structures can be used to provide the student with a model for a successful general paragraph, while also affording the enthusiastic instructor an opportunity to introduce the concept of dialectics--a pragmatic tool the remedial student will find useful when he advances to cause and effect, process, and to argumentative writing in later composition courses where the same basic

principles can be used to represent graphically various paragraph arrangements, and the structuring and organizing of essays of various purposes and for varied audiences.

Qualities derived from the basic signifier-signified relationships can be expanded, through metalanguage, to introduce proper use of (context-based) denotation and concrete detail, leading into well constructed topic sentences. Once the narrowing or particularizing of a topic sentence through a series of layered, interlocking stages of development has been incorporated, those qualities derived from exploitation of the signified-signifier relationships can be expanded, through connoted systems, to introduce proper use of connotation and sensory detail, leading into the formulation of a refining, exacting summation and extension of the central idea being developed within the paragraph, and from paragraph to paragraph in the essay. The dialectically structured paragraph evolved thus provides summation, paragraph conclusion, and transition, while also incorporating the philosophic category of subject-object-text (author-reader-text) relations. In so doing, not only context, but audience and purpose can be explained. The resulting paragraph model would look like this:

FIGURE 1

My experience during the past years with hundreds of remedial and composition students has been that they adjust relatively quickly to the unfamiliarity of the model, and with the constant practice, master it quickly. Students are able to imitate and then originate general paragraph structures and organizations. The dialectic principle, coupled with various reorderings of the model's components can be expanded to provide rational, empirical structuring and organizing patterns for essays of various subjects, purposes, and audiences. Following such a format, the results I observed were a larger number of students being able to produce, consistently, well balanced, well

structured, and well organized paragraphs and essays earlier in the course... and more importantly, after the course.

Conclusion

I am by no means suggesting that major emphasis in remedial and other composition courses be shifted in the direction of the language theories referred to here, but surely a small part of successive class periods, or a single period once every two weeks or so could be devoted to acquainting students, in a stimulating, innovative manner, to their language and how it communicates, without significantly altering the more established approaches to course content. On the contrary, such innovations would provide intellectually stimulating material to students who all too often 'switch-off' when confronted with traditional grammar and composition. Sometimes we forget that although these students are in need of remedial work in English, they are still college freshmen deserving of intellectually stimulating, horizon-broadening class material. Instructor enthusiasm may also be increased in light of the new material and challenge, which may also afford an opportunity to use, in lower division courses, some aspects of specialized interests. Since the instructor, his command of the material, and his related enthusiasm in classroom performance and conduct are perhaps the key elements in a successful programme, such language-oriented, innovative approaches may help erase among highly credentialed faculty the popular conception of freshmen composition courses as the academic dungeon of teaching assignments. The additional readings would not be so heavy as to detract from the student's other assignments, but should be supplemental as they do provide valuable examples of quality, directed prose writing. The graphic illustrations will provide remedial students who have experienced years of difficulty assimilating abstract grammatical rules and ideas of development, structure, and

organization a concrete means to deal with these more successfully in writing.

We must provide students, and especially remedial students, with help in developing a feel for their language and its uses before we can realistically expect them to use effective grammatical and composition skills. Innovative, academically sound approaches and methodologies should be encouraged and shared so that we might more effectively meet the challenge of remedial education.

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GENERAL PARAGRAPH DESIGN

Thesis Statement(s) / Topic Sentence(s)

Metalinguistic concerns can be treated here, via tone, style, audience interaction, etc.

Introductory statement(s) expressing, generally and denotatively, central idea(s)--including points A, B, C, D.

Examples/Illustrations

Series of interlocking examples/illustrations used to develop and focus premise(s).
Prewriting grouping and arranging can be used to determine sequential order of examples/illustrations: general-specific, specific-general; deductive, inductive; rhetorical purpose.

E.g. 1 developing A and introducing B;
E.g. 2 developing B and introducing C;
E.g. 3 developing C and introducing D;
Development of D.

Secondary Statement(s)

Statement(s) crystalising the intra- and inter-relationships among A,B,C,D which enable them to example/illustrate thesis/topic.

Summation/application of intra/inter-relationships to assure reader understanding; or, extension to introduce next paragraph's thesis/topic.

Conclusion/Transition

Complementing metalinguistic concerns can be treated here, thus adding symmetry to the paragraph.

By extending the four basic components, a general format for an essay can be illustrated and related directly to paragraph development and organisation.